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ABSTRACT

New Orleans ranks as the city with the largest Vietnamese community in the nation. With their growing number, problems with the Plaquemines Parish community as well as with some black organizations have developed, particularly in the areas of employment and housing. Several individuals have argued that local businesses hired large numbers of Vietnamese for jobs that were previously held by blacks and that Vietnamese refugees were placed in Federally subsidized housing while New Orleanians were already on waiting lists for such housing. Despite numerous efforts by the mass media, several organization and various individuals to relieve the tension, the controversy over the Vietnamese refugees and their resettlement continues. Prospects for a solution to the problem look dim. Projections show that more Vietnamese will be coming to the United States and, because of various factors, Louisiana will attract a sizeable portion of these new immigrants. (Author/EB)

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The Vietnamese of New Orleans: Problems of America's Newest Immigrants

Rawlein Soberano

In April of 1975, the government of Nguyen Van Thieu South Vietnam fell to the planned attack of the Communists. Many of the South's residents, who had fled North Vietnam earlier after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, realized the seriousness of the situation. With very few belongings, they left their beloved country and fled to a foreign land where customs and language were very much different from their own. As they journeyed to the United States, many Southeast Asian countries did not have the courage and decency to provide them a few days of rest from the rigors of the evacuation for fear of offending the new masters of their "reunified" homeland.

As of February, 1978, there were 135,000 Vietnamese throughout the United States. Today, New Orleans ranks as the number one city with the largest Vietnamese community in the nation. With their growing number, problems with Plaquemines Parish as well as with some black organizations became public. The controversy involving the Vietnamese and the authorities of Plaquemines Parish was along economic lines. Chalin O. Perez, chairman of the council in Plaquemines Parish said the Vietnamese were tying up their boats on private property without permission, and were becoming a nuisance to other fishermen. He called the Vietnamese "aliens, non-residents and non-property owners." However, the Vietnamese had their defenders from civic and business groups, as well as individuals.

As one individual put it: "Calling the Vietnamese 'aliens' smacks of ignorance concerning the history of this country which is founded on 'blood, sweat and tears' of aliens who immigrated here. One wonders whether Mr. Perez's own people were here with the Indians all their lives. Calling the Vietnamese 'non-residents' is dumb, because the term is a relative one, and as a public official, Mr. Perez should know that the Vietnamese are now in the process of changing their status from refugee to immigrant. Calling the Vietnamese 'non-property owners' is unfair, because they have been in this country for only three years, and many businesses, civic and church leaders can attest that they have accomplished as much, if not more, than the Cubans and Hungarians in the same time. Many Vietnamese families have moved into the suburbs. In many respects, this has been a success story, a realization of the American dream in Asian setting. Lastly, how would Mr. Perez justify the aggressiveness and competitiveness of other ethnic groups which are complimented as doing things the 'American' way, when the Vietnamese who do the very same thing to make a living are accused of wanting 'to come in and take our areas'?"[1]

Economics was also the starting point of the controversy between some black organizations and the Vietnamese. Howev such was not the case earlier when they first came. As a r of fact, as late as March, 1978, the national leaders of th black community across the country through the Internationa Rescue Committee had this advertisement in the New York Tim

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As concerned citizens of the black community - a community which itself continues to endure widespread economic deprivation--we sympathize with our Asian brothers and sisters in the refugee camps. But our concern must transcend the safe boundaries of mere sympathy. We must move toward action.

Many well-meaning Americans have argued that action on this pressing problem is unworkable in economic terms and potentially explosive. We recognize the scandalous state of America's economy--especially its devastating manifestations in the black community--and we realize that any program to assist these refugees will entail modest economic costs. Yet, we oppose the dehumanizing tendency of placing price tags on the heads of Indochinese refugees.

In the past, America has displayed an uncanny ability to adapt to unusual and seemingly impossible situations. We believe that America can once again reach out to an embattled minority--these refugees--and offer safe haven and hope.

Thus, we call upon President Carter and the United States Congress to facilitate the entrance of these refugees into the United States in the same spirit that we have urged our country to accept the victims of South Africa's apartheid.

Through our arduous struggle for civil, political and economic rights in America, we have learned a fundamental lesson: the battle against human misery is indivisible. Our continuing struggle for economic and political freedom is inextricably linked to the struggle of Indochinese refugees who also seek freedom. If our government lacks compassion for these dispossessed human beings, it is difficult to believe that the same government can have much compassion for America's black minority, or for America's poor.[2]

In spite of this call to support the Vietnamese refugees, Black-Vietnamese relations in New Orleans did not augur well. Carl Galmon of the A. Philip Randolph Institute charged during a meeting at the Treme Community Center that "the black population in New Orleans is losing out in the areas of housing and employment because of the Vietnamese refugees settling here." The meeting was scheduled to be a discussion between five community organizations and the board of directors of Associated Catholic Charities, but ACC declined the invitation and held a press conference of its own following the Treme gathering.

Galmon said the unemployment rate in the city among black adults was 22% and 40% among black teen-agers, and accused Catholic Charities for "not doing anything to help find jobs for those people." He said the entrance of the Vietnamese refugees into the labor market "has compounded the unemployment problems in the city."[3] Galmon alleged that many black workers were losing their jobs in order to provide space for the refugees. He said he knew of at least six local businesses in the metropolitan area that were working with ACC and had hired large numbers of Vietnamese in jobs which were previously filled by blacks.

Galmon presented a list of names of people he said have lost their jobs to refugees because they were union organizers or because they would not accept jobs at the low wages Vietnamese would take. He said both black and white workers have been dismissed so businesses could hire Vietnamese whose wages were being temporarily subsidized by "money up front."[4] He said 700 Vietnamese have been placed in federally subsidized housing, while 10,000 New Orleanians were on waiting lists for public and subsidized housing.

Contrary to this accusation, the federal government does not provide a wage subsidy to the Vietnamese, though it provides some money to reimburse employers for on-the-job training of the Vietnamese. The total amount of this subsidy for Louisiana for 1978 is $7,500, and there are only three Vietnamese refugees taking advantage of it, hardly enough to make a dent in the job market picture.

The federal program for Vietnamese refugees was established right after the fall of Saigon in the Spring of 1975. The Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program (IRAP) was designed to help refugees get a foothold in the United States. It is scheduled to terminate in 1980. IRAP gets its money from the federal Title XX program. It can spend only $250 to $350 on each refugee whom it relocates. IRAP does not provide a job subsidy, but it provides salaries for people who serve as employment counselors for the refugees, such as some employees at Associated Catholic Charities. Its relocation program allows a one-shot expenditure of $200 per person on housing, and this figure includes a deposit and the first month's rent, along with some basic things, like a mattress to sleep on and some food. There is no more federal money after the family has moved in and settled.

Often the Vietnamese refugee can qualify for the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Section 8 housing, which is a program for low-income Americans. People who live in housing which qualifies for Section 8 have their incomes evaluated by the federal government. They pay a portion, and the government pays the rest. In addition, some Vietnamese live in HUD's 236 housing. In the 236 program, HUD helps the developer of the apartment with his financing costs, and this affords an indirect subsidy by keeping the rent low. However, both Section 8 and 236 program are open to whites and blacks, as well as Vietnamese.[5]

Going back to Galmon, the main office of A. Philip Randolph Institute in New York did not share his predicament towards the Vietnamese. In two letters, one sent to Rev. Michael Haddad of Associated Catholic Charities by Bayard Rustin, President, and Norman Hill, Executive Director of APRI stated:

> Please accept our sincere apologies for the recent actions of our local affiliate directed against Associated Catholic Charities.
>
> Last month, both of us spent a great deal of time and effort in countering anti-refugee feelings within the black community. In fact, the Randolph Institute organized support for the enclosed statement which appeared in the March 19 issue of the New York Times. Indeed, many have

credited that statement with reversing anti-refugee sentiment within certain sectors of the Carter Administration.

As you can well see, the position of our New Orleans group is diametrically opposed to the position supported by virtually everyone else involved in the Institute. The activities and statements of Carl Galmon were not sanctioned by us, and he never consulted us on the matter.[6]

The second letter was sent to Galmon himself:

Your well-publicized dispute with the Associated Catholic Charities of New Orleans has caused considerable embarrassment to the A. Philip Randolph Institute. By waging a virtual war against the Vietnamese refugees of New Orleans, you have misrepresented the national position of the Institute, and seriously damaged our reputation. Nowhere in the press accounts were you identified solely as a local chapter official, thus your views were construed to reflect national policy.

Last month, both of us spent a great deal of time and effort in organizaing black support for the Indochinese refugees. As you can see from the enclosed statement, black leaders--including Brother Randolph and virtually every trade unionist associated with the Institute--support justice and compassion for our Asian brothers and sisters.

We adamantly refuse to blame this hounded minority for the terrible economic conditions of the black community. Moreover, we will not engage in a debilitating and dehumanizing struggle between two minority groups for a few economic crumbs. The real cause of black unemployment lies elsewhere; we gain nothing by focusing our attack on the Indochinese refugees, many who fled their homeland with only their lives.

Our organization has a long and valued tradition of local autonomy. However, local affiliates must use discression when adopting positions and engaging in actions which reflect on the national organization. This is especially true when local groups find it necessary to publicly disagree with national policy on key issues, such as the refugee problem. By failing to consult with either of us, you have demonstrated a serious lack of understanding of accepted Institue practice. We are not trying to enforce a monolithic line among our affiliates. Rather, we are simply trying to encourage organizational cooperation, courtesy, and a sense of responsibility.

> Although the damage you caused is, to a very large extent, irreparable, we are requesting that you publicize the national position of the Randolph Institute on this question. Hopefully, this will correct the false image of our organization and position created by your actions.[7]

As the controversy was brewing, the local Urban League joined in the complaints about the influx of Vietnamese refugees which was "displacing blacks from housing and jobs. The League president, Clarence Barney, said the resettlement program was

attracting more refugees here and should be stopped until a full impact study was made. Leaders of ACC, in charge of the federal resettlement program in New Orleans, responded by saying that they were "tired of hearing such unsubstantiated charges released in the media" and said that direct financial assistance to the Vietnamese ended in 1976.[8]

The press was not idle throughout the whole controversy. Two dailies and the Catholic Archdiocesan weekly came out openly against the position of the local Urban League. As the States-Item put it:

> It is dismaying to see the Urban League, long a champion of equal rights and opportunities for blacks, sniping at Catholic Charities because of its role in helping Vietnamese refugees gain a foothold in New Orleans and adjoining communities. What could be more American than for responsible community organizations to help qualified refugees of any nationality find a place in this country?.....
>
> The Vietnamese have proved to be tenacious, resilient and resourceful in adapting to an alien and, unfortunately, at times socially hostile environment. Like Yugoslavs, Irish, Italians and Poles before them, they have grasped eagerly at whatever economic opportunities came their way. If they are making it, it is because they are willing to work for less and take whatever jobs they can find.
>
> It is indeed ironic to find Mr. Barney and the Urban League in the same boat as Chalin O. Perez, president of the Plaquemines Parish Commission Council, who carps over the competition a few Vietnamese are causing established fishermen in the parish.
>
> We had come to expect so much more from the Urban League.[9]

The Clarion-Herald approached the subject from a different angle:

> The Urban League of New Orleans has joined others in an attack on the Vietnamese refugees who have come to the New Orleans area and on Associated Catholic Charities for their part in the federal resettlement program.....
>
> This is indeed the lesson to be gained from the latest sorry episode of petty charges against Catholic Charities and, it follows, the Vietnamese refugees that have benefited from Catholic Charities' superb efforts. The need to pull together in the struggle by human beings of whatever color or nationality to better themselves and to live lives of dignity and freedom should be the overriding concern of all Americans and, above all, of groups dedicated to working on behalf of any minorities, whether they be Jews fleeing Soviet persecution, or Southeast Asians, Africans, Cubans, or Salvadoreans. Cooperation, not reckless criticism, is needed to improve the lot of all the underprivileged.[10]

The Times-Picayune also came out positive and confident that such problems were not beyond solution:

> In attempting to sort out the unseemly fuss over local Vietnamese immigrants, we find two problems--one easy, one harder, but nothing that cannot be solved with good will and common sense on all sides.
>
> The easy one is the problem of Vietnamese who do not yet understand the rules, regulations and customs of their new land and the necessity of learning and obeying them. This can be handled simply by telling them, with forceful warnings that enforcement bears on all, regardless of origin or condition.
>
> The harder one is the wider problem of folding a large number of immigrants into the local economy. Some black leaders--not necessarily, we suggest, representing the black community as a whole--complain that the Vietnamese are taking jobs and housing away from blacks.....
>
> ....Indeed, the humanitarian dimension is what raises the issue above that of economic competition. Black individuals and organizations like the Urban League risk putting themselves in the unedifying position of attacking what amounts to the same kind of "affirmative action" they demand as a right of blacks and creating a new fault line of discrimination along which needless tensions can build.
>
> New Orleans absorbed a wave of Cuban refugees some years ago, and the nation is responsible for the Vietnamese plight far more directly than it was for the Cuban. New Orleans has historically been a cosmopolitan area to which all comers--with degrees of initial difficulty depending upon the occasion--have ultimately contributed much. Instead of sniping at each other over the problem, we should be working with each other on the solution.[11]

Various ethnic organizations also came out in full support for the Vietnamese. The Cubans had this to say:

> The Cuban Community Action of Louisiana wishes to express publicly its support of the Indo-Chinese Resettlement Program knowing full well the current plight of America's newest immigrants.
>
> As recent immigrants ourselves, Cubans understand what it is like to be uprooted from homeland to escape persecution at the hands of the Communists. We know what it is like to be relocated in a foreign country and an alien culture. We too suffered some initial discrimination in jobs and housing. But as time passed we were able to convince our American neighbors that we too wanted to be good citizens of this great country and to make whatever contributions we could to make it a better place in which to live and raise our children.
>
> ....The English and French, the Dutch and Africans, Germans and Poles, Irish and Italians all came before us. And now the Indo-Chinese, whose nations have been torn apart by three decades of war and aggression at the hands of international communism, follow us to this great land.

> Are we to deny them help in finding a place in which to live and a job to feed their families? Can 7,500 people not be absorbed in a metropolitan area of 1,000,000 without undue hardship on those of us already here?[12]

The Oriental community in New Orleans was also vocal in its defense of the Vietnamese in this issue. They felt that the latter were unjustly blamed for the plight of some groups in the area. As they put it:

> We, the Oriental community in New Orleans, are appalled by the negativism of some individuals and organizations towards the Vietnamese in this city. Playing with incorrect statistics can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of the uninformed and discontented. As taxpayers, we feel it is cheaper to have subsidized the Vietnamese with a small portion of our tax money than to bear the burden of providing revenues from an already ailing welfare system.
>
> It is not fair to use the Vietnamese as scapegoats for those who are frustrated at improving their own lot. Because of language problems, the Vietnamese are in a worse position to get jobs than any other minority group. But their determination, initiative and loyalty to their place of work have gained for them the respect and admiration of many civic and business leaders in this area.[13]

Individuals too used the Readers Forum of the different newspapers in the community to express their thoughts and sentiments on the controversy. In reply to two letters to the editor against Vietnamese refugees published earlier, one reader, a Vietnamese, replied:

> Vietnamese refugees did not come here for this country's wealth; we fled Vietnam to save our lives. We did not find houses, new cars, boats or jobs offered to us on a silver platter. We came with a single suitcase each--if we were lucky. We were provided a rent-free house for several months, less than $10 a week per person for that same period and aid in finding employment.
>
> We took whatever jobs were available to make ends meet. These jobs were not created for Vietnamese refugees; they were here before we arrived, jobs Americans did not want because of menial working conditions and low pay.
>
> We have lived frugally, saved our money, and worked hard, often swallowing our pride to retain our jobs.
>
> It has paid off. Many of us now own homes, new cars and fishing boats. We are realizing the American dream.
>
> We do not seek welfare or government handouts. Nothing is free. We wish only to live our lives in freedom, raise our families and educate our children.
>
> But a few bigots wish to impede us. They do not want Vietnamese children in "their" schools, though many Vietnamese children are on school honor rolls despite a language barrier. These same bigots make it appear that

we are beggars here for handouts, when all we wish is to work.

The vast majority of Americans have been kind to us. They have shown generosity for which Americans are renowned throughout the world. And for this we are most thankful.

We are refugees come to your land. We are taxpayers already and hope to be citizens soon. We hope to join the millions before us who have become part of the melting pot that is America. We are thankful to be in America, thankful for its freedom and opportunities.[14]

Another wrote:

The writers of those letters must not go unchallenged. If they do, it will only be the loud voice of hate and destruction that is heard. I promised myself after seeing the television show "Holocaust" that I would never be silent again where human rights were involved. I feel strongly that the voice of faith, hope, and love should speak louder than any other.[15]

However, the controversy took an unexpected turn when the Vietnamese, who are scattered throughout different communities in the metropolitan area, received death threats in cards which had these words, "MESSAGE: Be ready to leave; you are marked for DEATH." Others received notes with crude drawings of skulls and crossbones with drops of blood. Who sent them? This was the big question when the Federal Bureau of Investigation stepped into the picture to look closely at these new developments involving the Vietnamese in this city.[16]

On the other hand, projections show that more Vietnamese will be coming to the United States, as the present number is now over 150,000, and Louisiana will attract a sizeab portion of these new immigrants. Various factors are respon ble for attracting Vietnamese to Louisiana: 1. The religious and cultural characteristics of many cities in the State. The Catholic faith and the French setting make them feel at home in this crescent city. Its warm climate is a welcome haven from the merciless cold of Michigan, Minnesota and Illinois; 2. The ecology of the State--It is for this reason that Southeast Louisiana played an important role in the commando training of some of the GI's during the Vietnam War, because of its similarity to that in Vietnam; 3. The bayous and other waterways provide a valuable psychological link to many Vietnamese fishermen who depended on the water for their livelihood from early youth; 4. A good number of religious orders have members in the area who have spent some time in Vietnam in the past, which affords an explanation for their present involvement with the immigrants; 5. Lastly, in spite of the high unemployment rate across the country, Louisiana is still the place of opportunity for the hard-working, even with only a limited skill. It is unfortunate that the scene of the 1850's is being recreated today in the job market in New Orleans, when the unskilled Irish and Germans who had been competing with the free blacks for cheap labor are now replaced by the Vietnamese who are also competing with the blacks.

Footnotes

1. Rawlein Soberano, "Defends Viet Refugees" (Views of Readers), Times-Picayune, April 18, 1978, p. 8.

2. "Black Americans Urge Admission of Indochinese Refugees," New York Times, March 19, 1978.

3. Therese L. Mitchell, "Vietnamese Take Jobs from Blacks is Charge," Times-Picayune, April 14, 1978, p. 9.

4. Frederick Johnson, "Job, Housing Taken by Viets, Blacks Charge," States-Item, April 14, 1978, p. A-4.

5. "A Sad Tale of Black Activists Versus Vietnamese," Figaro, April 19, 1978, p. 24.

6. Letter to Rev. Michael Haddad of Associated Catholic Charities by Bayard Rustin and Norman Hill of APRI, April 21, 1978. Copies were also sent to ACC Board members.

7. Letter to Carl Galmon by Rustin and Hill of APRI, April 24, 1978. It also requested that a letter of apology be sent to Rev. Haddad, and a copy of this letter sent to APRI's New York main office. See also "Galmon Defamation Suit Requests $1.7 Million," Times-Picayune, May 13, 1978, p. 4; Thomas M. Finney, "The Vietnamese Among Us" (Readers Forum), States-Item, April 19, 1978, p. A-6; Charities Head Denies Charges," Clarion-Herald, April 20, 1978, p. 3; Frank Johnson, "Wrong Target" (Letters to the Editor), The Louisiana Weekly, April 22, 1978, p. 5; Black Group Disavows Dispute Over Viets," States-Item, April 29, 1978.

8. Millie Ball, "League Joins in Refugee Attack," Times-Picayune, May 12, 1978; see also Ed Anderson, "Discussion Urged to End Refugee Rift," Times-Picayune, May 3, 1978; Millie Ball, "Viet Refugees Take Jobs from New Orleans Blacks," National Catholic Reporter, May 26, 1978, p. 2.

9. "Urban League Wrong" (Editorial), States-Item, May 15, 1978, p. A-12.

10. "Attack on Charities is Unjustified, Unfortunate" (Editorial), Clarion-Herald, May 18, 1978.

11. "Managing Viet 'Crisis'" (Editorial), Times-Picayune, May 18, 1978, p. 10.

12. See Times-Picayune, May 16, 1978.

13. See Young Men's Business Club of Greater New Orleans, Inc., West Bank Council Newsletter, May-June, 1978, p. 2.

14. Anh T. Nguyen, "A Viet Refugee Speaks" (Views of Readers), Times-Picayune, May 20, 1978, p. 14. This letter was written in response to the letters of Denise Fiegle and Celia

Strauss which appeared earlier in the Views of Readers of the Times-Picayune, May 5, 1978.

15. Patsy L. Clement, "Ancestors Were Refugees" (Views of Readers), Times-Picayune, May 15, 1978.

16. "N.O. Viet Threats Investigated by FBI," States-Item, May 24, 1978, p. A-14; see also "Viet Refugees Mailed Death Threats Here," Times-Picayune, May 25, 1978, p. 3. Dr. Rawlein Soberano, Director of Title I Project, Civic Education for Vietnamese as Prospective Citizens at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in New Orleans accused whoever sent these cards of "trying to move the clock back to the 1930's to prewar Nazi Germany," Channel 8, WVUE-TV, New Orleans, May 23, 1978, 6:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. News.

(This artcile was taken from Rawlein G. Soberano and Jane Zilles-Soberano, eds., Introduction to Sociology: Contemporary Readings in Practical Setting (Lexington, MA 1978).